

Piltzville / Rain or shine, small-town group dedicates itself to smooth strides // Written by LORI GRANNIS Photographed by KURT WILSON of the Missoulian PILTZVILLE - At first glance, she might be just a little old lady walking to a neighbor's house, or on a quick mission to the market for a quart of milk. But Lavonne Otto's gait is far too hurried for milk - or butter or sugar, for that matter. Otto has been walking with such purpose ever since she retired at the age of 65, and three women from her church asked her to join morning jaunts. Fifteen years later, at the tender age of 80, she leads the pack of what is informally known as the Piltzville Walkers - a group of six or so seniors who log between 15 and 25 miles per week, as much for social oiling as for well-being. Otto is also the undisputed fastest walker in the group. Jim Willis, 77, walked this road for 30 years before joining the group, and says Otto is a force to be reckoned with on the asphalt. At just 5 feet tall, she says her speed is as much a matter of necessity as anything. "I'm the shortest and I have to walk the fastest to keep up with the long-legged crew," she says. "It's just my habit of walking that way." For most people, there doesn't seem to be much to the town of Piltzville, other than a fire station. The walkers say most people give a blank look when say the name of their hometown. Even Missoula County has a hard time quantifying Piltzville. According to the county's Web site, it knows the town officially exists, and that people pay taxes there. It also knows it sits at 46 degrees 55 minutes north latitude and 114 degrees 5 minutes west longitude, and even that the elevation in central Piltzville is 3,294 feet. What it can't seem to confirm is its population. This group of Piltzville Walkers estimate that the small town has about 1,000 residents, living in pockets of homesteads and gentleman's farms within its seven-mile radius. And that, the walkers say, makes Piltzville well worth looking after. In fact, these morning walkers have accomplished a lot over the years. Apart from overcoming the usual adversities of life, together as a group they were able to save an old black bridge, and spur construction of a much-needed safety trail that will outlast them all by decades. "We went door-to-door to get the signatures to save the black bridge in Bonner - 550 names in all," said Peggy Layton, 77. "And a few of us were very active in council meetings about the Piltzville Safety Trail." That path will eventually span a seven- or eight-mile stretch from Bonner School, down Rustic Road to the outskirts of Turah. Funding for the dual-use - pedestrian and equestrian - walkway comes from Superfund cleanup dollars earmarked for the nearby Milltown Reservoir site. "We're thrilled about it - we can get off the road now," says walker Vonnie Nulliner, 68. Rain or shine, sleet or snow, from Mondays to Fridays, the group walks mornings up the same road from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. In winter, they don "yak tracks" - special rubber and metal shoe sole attachments for traction in snow and ice - but still they walk. Otto and Layton set out each morning from houses sitting a mile east of the Piltzville fire station. They make use of the extra mile by picking up garbage and recyclables from road ditches once each week. Layton says it's surprising what people throw out, and the pair of them get "ticked" at what is heaved out of car windows - cans, bottles, paper and assorted unmentionables. "We have found dirty diapers," said Layton, now 77. "Now that's just not funny." From surgeries to personal tragedies and losses - nothing interferes with this group's morning missions for long. Otto, a widow of 27 years, says she didn't slow down all that much following heart surgery a few years ago, after a random cholesterol test revealed a long-hidden congenital defect. "Who knew I had a hole in my heart all these years?" she says of the operation that repaired the defect, and installed a new heart valve. Jim Willis, a widower himself of two years, had the very same valve surgery as Otto a while back, and discloses that they each have pig valves as replacements for the faulty ones. Otto doesn't look back, and continues her fast-striding. "Yeah, we both get a little sad every time we smell bacon, I must say," she says. With matching walking sticks in hand, the group keep pace along the yellow line that cuts the center of the asphalt dividing Rustic Road. Walker Vonnie Nulliner, 68, joins Layton and Otto to lead the herd, planting their long walking sticks into the roadbed in chorus. Layton's husband, Paul, carved the sticks from chokecherry branches, personalizing each with the owner's name along the length of the staff. As they glide beneath the Interstate 90 overpass, a transportation worker waves, and turns her sign from "Stop" to "Slow." To keep things fun, Willis has more than once has played jokes on fellow members - mostly on the women. "One time I planted a \$5 bill in the ditch along this road and then played like I'd found it," he says. "You should have seen those gals - for weeks, they had their heads down looking for money." Willis threw his head back and laughed. Over the years, the group has watched houses being built, foals being born, herds of chickens pecking scratch in driveways, and waved as runners they know pass them on the road. They

even encounter famous artists on occasion. Sculptor Powell Swanser lives nearby, and has invited them in to view his work. Talk runs the gamut - from local politics to the daytime soap opera "The Young and the Restless." Otto and Willis both love the show, and often catch up on storyline. Neither can remember just how long they've watched. "I think it was ever since Nikki Newman was stripping," says Otto, of a regular cast character. Willis notes that the soap's longtime lead actor, Eric Braeden, once lived in Bonner, and worked at the mill when his name was Hans J rg Gudegast. Just then, two cars drive by - one on the interstate above, the other on Rustic Road, greeting the walkers with loud horn honks and waves. Group members wave back, and keep on walking.

Reporter Lori Grannis may be reached at 523-5251 or by e-mail at lori.grannis@lee.net. Reach photographer Kurt Wilson at (406) 523-5244 or by e-mail at kwilson@missoulian.com.

((CUTLINES)) Warmed by the first rays of morning sunshine, the Piltzville Walkers stride east on the frontage road toward Turah on one of their walks last week. The group of seniors logs between 15 and 25 miles per week.

Each person carries a walking stick with the group's name and their individual names burned into the wood.

Walking the usual route on Rustic Road between Piltzville and Turah gives the group a unique perspective on their town.